



connections

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Urban Rivers, Smart Growth, and Trails

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Communities across the Commonwealth and the nation have taken a renewed interest in their riverfronts. In doing so, they gain opportunities to increase their tax-base, restore environmentally degraded sites and waters, and expand local and regional recreational attractions like trails.

History

Most of our oldest cities developed along rivers, which served as the main source of power and transportation and as a convenient waste removal system. Over time, industrial activities degraded the health and quality of our rivers. Cities turned their backs on these “linear cesspools” and were gradually cut off from their rivers, both physically and psychologically. With the Clean Water Act and elevated environmental consciousness that began in the 1960s and ‘70s, rivers have experienced vast improvements and protections. Although some of our state’s rivers still have contamination issues, many are now pleasant places to stroll along, canoe on, and even fish and swim in.

Urban Rivers & Smart Growth

The unnatural colors and unpleasant odors associated with some of our rivers are now a thing of the past. Cities are reclaiming a once neglected resource as an asset. From a smart



growth perspective, previously developed riverfront sites are appropriate places for new development. Locating new jobs and homes in areas that already have infrastructure, businesses, and transportation options not only reinvigorates downtowns, but reduces sprawl. However, before property owners reinvest in these areas or allow people to move in, brownfield sites should be remediated and environmental problems addressed.

Perhaps most importantly, bringing more people back to the river builds a constituency to work for further improvements and amenities that enhance the quality of life. Recreational trails, neighborhood restaurants and shops, streetscape improvements, and public art all contribute to the remaking of urban riverfronts into desirable destinations. And that’s the key to restoring these rivers - people that love the river will take care of it.

Urban Rivers and Trails

Rivers are natural locations for both water and land trails for a variety of reasons: they're linear and scenic, they link historic sites and population centers, and they offer the opportunity to reconnect with nature. Recent studies have linked land use to public health - especially obesity rates. Recreational trails provide additional opportunities to get that thirty minutes of daily exercise that we all need. Trails also provide an alternate way to get to work or school, helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There's already been an impressive amount of work planning and constructing regional trails that follow rivers in Massachusetts, such as the Connecticut, Blackstone, and Concord Rivers. And there are more initiatives to come.

Planning

In 2002 and 2007, the Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA) hosted UrbanRiver Visions charrettes in thirteen communities. These one to two day planning events brought together a wide range of residents to envision the future of their urban riverfronts. Working with a team of consultants, community members crafted [vision plans](http://www.urbanrivervisions2.org/default.asp) (www.urbanrivervisions2.org/default.asp) and action steps, accompanied by plenty of energy. Connections among the river, neighborhoods, and local and regional trails figured prominently in all the visions. Other key topics during the charrettes included riverfront access, scenic view preservation, and impassable stream debris.



Implementation

Communities that think seriously about their rivers can make impressive strides in realizing their visions. Just this past month, the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) awarded two grants for riverfront work. Shelburne Falls received a Smart Growth/Smart Energy grant to develop a site assessment and design plans for an observation deck overlooking the glacial potholes at Salmon Falls on the Deerfield River. As part of this grant, the town will also plan for the trail node to improve the connection to the Mahican – Mohawk Trail. Haverhill, a more urbanized city, is receiving \$400,000 to acquire a rail right-of-way on the south side of the Merrimack River. When complete, this rail trail will connect to the boardwalk on the north side of the river, creating a 2.5 mile walking loop, linking two commuter rail stations, and connecting to a regional trail network. These are just two examples of community efforts to expand trail networks and create unique riverfront destinations.

What's really exciting about the convergence of river restoration, smart growth, and trail development is the far-reaching social and ecological benefits that result. The impacts range from the global (helping mitigate climate change) to the individual (less risk of heart disease and diabetes). When done right, riverfront revitalization can restore the habitat and health of wildlife, humans, and potentially, the rest of the natural world.

Tips and Tools

(Resources, links, and publications)

The **Riverways Program** (www.mass.gov/dfwele/river/index.htm), a part of the Department of Fish and Game, is another great resource for communities that want to reclaim and restore their rivers. They focus on ecological functionality, helping protect and restore rivers so they are less flood-prone, healthier, and provide better aquatic habitat.

The **Smart Growth Online** website gives book suggestions and lists resources for smart growth by state (www.smartgrowth.org/default.asp). The **Smart Growth America** website provides additional information on smart growth by topic (www.smartgrowthamerica.org/).

“**Urban Environments**” is an informational e-mail resource to help municipalities and community organizations advance environmental justice, urban land conservation, brownfields to parks, and environmental quality in cities throughout Massachusetts. To subscribe, contact Janet Curtis, Policy Coordinator for Environmental Justice and Urban Environments at the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Email: janet.curtis@state.ma.us

The American Trails website has a **Maintenance Checklist for Urban Trails** at www.americantrails.org/resources/ManageMaintain/MaintCheck.html and an article on the history and uses of trails in urban areas at www.americantrails.org/resources/greenways/GrnwyUrbanSHM.html.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources’ “**Trail Planning, Design & Development Guidelines**” has now been posted on the agency's website for free non-commercial download. Go to www.dnr.state.mn.us/publications/index.html and click on either 'DNR Books' or 'Trails & Waterways'. Downloads are password-protected, but contact information is provided online for obtaining this information.

Blazing the Way

For innovative ways to implement smart growth principles, visit the **EPA’s 2007 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement** page at www.epa.gov/dced/awards/sg_awards_publication_2007.htm#overall_excellence

The **City of Seattle** is working on using urban trails to facilitate bicycling as a viable transportation choice. See <http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/urbantrails.htm>.

On the Road Ahead

(Upcoming events and deadlines)

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions Annual Environmental Conference – March 1, 2008, Hogan Campus Center, Holy Cross College, Worcester:
http://www.maccweb.org/edu_aec.html

Green Cities: Lessons From Boston and Beyond, March 5, 2008, 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., Rabb Lecture Hall, Boston Public Library. Speakers include Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust, and other distinguished presenters. For more information, go to <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/rappaport/events/greencities.htm>.

2008 Professional Trailbuilders Conference, March 9-14, Reno, Nevada. For more information on the conference or to register visit the website. A Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP) Coordinator Workshop and Trail Ware Training Workshop will be offered at the Conference, March 9-10. For more information see http://www.trailbuilders.org/conference/ptba_conf.html.

National Trail Symposium, November 15-18, Little Rock, Arkansas. American Trails brings the worldwide trails community together for an inspirational and educational conference. The Symposium addresses both non-motorized and motorized issues and our vision for trails and greenways nationwide. For more information see <http://www.americantrails.org/2008/index.html> or contact American Trails at (530) 547-2060 or symposium@americantrails.org.

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